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ABSTRACT

Twenty-eight in-depth interviews were conducted with top executives in Philadelphia to discover issues and concerns about committing organizational resources over time to workplace literacy programs. Participants represented major organizations and institutions, both manufacturing and service. The executives reported that the manifestations of illiteracy in relationship to the organization are initially subtle--an increasing difficulty in hiring qualified employees, salaries for entry-level jobs escalating, or the need to restructure and downgrade job descriptions. Respondents cited schools and government as primarily responsible for producing literate students. However, difficult family situations, drugs, divorce, poverty and other factors were often cited as mitigating circumstances. Solutions to the problem of maintaining a qualified work force were designed as a correlate of the context in which the worker is held. Those who considered the worker as a resource for the organization implemented work skills training programs designed to train the workers for the task at hand and for promotion. Those who considered that training programs should support workers in the broader context of their ability to function in the community had an expanded view that included work skills literacy and personal literacy. Executives recommended that literacy be positioned as everybody's problem and that businesses be educated in ways in which they can contribute and become involved. (YLB)

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LITERACY IN THE WORKPLACE:

THE EXECUTIVE PERSPECTIVE

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

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LITERACY IN THE WORKPLACE: THE EXECUTIVE PERSPECTIVE

PURPOSE

This study was undertaken on behalf of those of us who currently lack the skills to be functionally literate. We assert that functional literacy is our cultural birthright, and that many of us are currently denied that birthright.

As a result of the public presentation of this research, we are aligned with the vision declared by Jack Ernsberger, Vice President, IBM, head of the Mayor's Task Force on Literacy in Philadelphia: **A LITERATE AMERICA BY 2001**

We thank the Task Force of the Mayor's Commission on Literacy in Philadelphia and the Productivity Council of the National Association of Broadcasters for their encouragement and support in designing and conducting this study, and for their commitment that this report shall make a difference toward the goal of a literate America. Special thanks to Eileen Colville, Main Line Publications, for the generous donation of transcription services, which provided a reliable source of reference to the language, concerns and issues of those interviewed for this project, and Arpi Asdourian, EAZY 101, for her help in recruiting participants.

DEDICATION

The contribution of this report is dedicated to the memory of
Scott Wiggins
who cared about his world.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The dynamics of literacy in the workplace are complex and are confounded by lack of agreement on definition, responsibility and effective methods of resolution. Among the 28 top executives interviewed in August, September and October in Philadelphia, representing service and manufacturing organizations, government, education and health care, the attitudes and adaptation practices associated with workplace literacy problems vary widely. Most apparent, however, is the lack of a coherent vision uniting efforts and focusing resources. While these executives agree that illiteracy exists as a serious problem in society, there is little awareness of the magnitude of the problem within their own organizations.

The manifestations of the literacy problem become apparent when the organization must take action, such as changing hiring standards, downgrading jobs, and increasing or decreasing salary levels, in order to fill positions and hire qualified workers. Only occasionally is the lack of a literate workforce identified as the root cause of these problems.

Solutions to the problem of maintaining a qualified workforce are designed as a correlate of the context in which the worker is held. Those who consider the worker as a resource for the organization to "get the job done" and to be available to forward the organization's objectives have implemented work skills training programs designed not only to train the workers for the task at hand, but also to provide for promotional opportunities. In contrast, those executives who consider that training programs should support the worker in the broader context of their ability

to function in the community view work skills literacy programs in isolation as insufficient. This expanded view of the worker includes work skills literacy and personal literacy. In this context, the organization's responsibility for the worker includes supporting the worker's expanding capacity to function independently, think for themselves, make decisions, solve problems and sustain themselves as a family member and citizen.

Most of these executives are concerned about the issues at the heart of literacy problems, and differ in their appraisal of the appropriate and effective use of their organization's resources. Some respondents claim that literacy is simply not a problem within their organizations; job applicants who cannot demonstrate that they can function at the required level are simply screened out. However, many of these same companies do encourage their workers to volunteer on behalf of literacy on their own time.

Respondents theorized upon the root cause of the literacy problem. They cite the schools and the government as primarily responsible to produce literate students. As a generalization, the family and the individual are also held accountable. However, difficult family situations, drugs, divorce, poverty and other factors were often cited as mitigating circumstances.

These executives, regardless of the scope of organizationally sponsored programs on behalf of work skills or personal literacy, acknowledge that they do not know the most effective and efficient means by which to address the issue; they are confronting the question of the organization's responsibility for literacy and the design of effective methods to deal with the manifestations of the problem of workplace literacy.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Recent statistics suggest that as much as 40% of the nation's work force lacks the basic literacy skills necessary to perform their jobs effectively. As a result, workplace literacy has become an increasingly urgent issue. Given the rate of technological expansion, and the current level of literacy, it is estimated that by 1990, an increasing proportion of our nation's work force will not have the skills needed to perform and compete effectively in the workplace.

Recently, the Mayor's Commission on Literacy in Philadelphia formed a Task Force to examine issues regarding workplace literacy. The Mayor's Task Force, in conjunction with the National Association of Broadcaster's Productivity Council, requested that Omega Group Inc., located in Haverford, Pennsylvania, design and conduct a qualitative marketing research study to aid in the development of an effective program to address business executives regarding the complex issues involved in workplace literacy. This study also complements two previous studies commissioned for the National Association of Broadcasters, Work Resource and Retraining Initiation, which examined workplace literacy from the workers' perspective.

OBJECTIVES

In the workplace, three groups are directly or indirectly involved or affected by literacy programs: corporate executives, departmental managers, and employees who are participating, or could benefit from participating in such programs. In designing this study, it was determined that the most critical and influential market to examine is corporate executives.

The overall objective of this study is to discover issues and concerns among executives regarding committing organizational resources over time to workplace literacy programs. The following areas of investigation provide the foundation for this research exploration:

- The value of workplace literacy programs in terms of using company resources more effectively, and the impact of such programs on quality and operating costs;

- The responsibility of workplace education (i.e., is literacy a management or a human resource issue?);

- Awareness of workplace literacy problems and concerns within an executive's company, including what is present now and what is needed for the future;

- The relationship between considering workers as "partners" in the company (or not) and committing resources for workplace literacy programs;

- The development of the existing labor force in contrast to viewing labor as an unlimited resource;

- The demonstration of sincerity to employees regarding executives' commitment to workplace literacy programs, and the "message" employees receive in regard to their participation in such programs (i.e., reward or the threat of demotion or penalization);

- The need for literacy training based on a lack of quality and productivity in comparison to foreign competition.

SPECIFICATIONS

Twenty-eight (28) one-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted among top executives in Philadelphia. Participants were selected to represent major organizations or institutions, both manufacturing and service, and top level decision makers.

Each interview was pre-scheduled, held in the executive's office, lasted approximately one and a quarter hours, and was tape recorded for analytical purposes. The executives were promised confidentiality in that no association with their names or their organizations would be made to any specific commentary.

In this report the reference to the respondents as executives includes chief executive officers, presidents, vice presidents, superintendents, union heads, commissioners, and other similar titles. In almost all cases, those interviewed were the top persons within the organization or company. In a few cases, there were several people who joined the executive during the interview to provide additional perspective and information.

METHODOLOGY AND INTERVIEWING

To address the project objectives, Omega Group used BEHAVIOR-LINK, Omega Group's proprietary team approach to qualitative research, designed to obtain critical information on rational and emotional issues and their relationship to behavior, and to analyze study findings within a behavioral context. The interview process explored the executives' opinions, attitudes and beliefs related to employee education and training programs, and the relationship of these programs to the issue of literacy.

During each interview, as the executive expressed opinions and beliefs regarding the issue of literacy, the interviewer probed to determine the degree to which the expenditure of resources on behalf of worker literacy within their organizations and within the community was consistent with the commentary.

FINDINGS

The following report delineates the results of the executive interviews regarding literacy in the workplace. Verbatim quotes are used throughout to support the findings.

DEFINITION OF LITERACY

When asked to provide a definition of literacy, the executives interviewed could offer no measurable definition. Rather, they define literacy in broad functional terms, such as:

"Has basic skills."

"Reads well enough to cope, survive, [illegible] life."

"Can read, write, find things in [illegible]"

"Able, with training, to handle the job."

"General skills, reasoning and [illegible]"

"Part of the basic fabric of life."

AWARENESS AND RESPONSE TO THE ISSUE OF WORKER LITERACY

The executives reported that the manifestations of illiteracy in relationship to the organization are initially subtle -- an increasing difficulty in hiring qualified employees, salaries for entry level jobs escalating, or the need to restructure and downgrade job descriptions. As the magnitude of the problems becomes apparent, hiring standards and practices, training programs, job requirements and technology come under scrutiny. Decisions must be made, many of which have major operational and marketing implications.

The executives interviewed report that workers with a minimum level of literacy cannot read OSHA regulations, signage, benefits information or forms; they cannot effectively participate in training programs, thus threatening their own safety and the safety of valuable equipment. Many are not able to calculate numbers, give change, or fill orders accurately. One bank executive states: *"the bank training program now includes training for entry level employees to add a simple column of numbers."* Another executive indicates that their video training program was ineffective with newly hired minority workers; programs had to be redesigned to teach by *"show and do."* Even when these workers prove capable of learning a specific task adequately, they are not able to transfer the skill to other related tasks. This same executive claims that literacy is not a problem in his organization -- illiterate people are simply screened out.

> *"Because as long as you can fill your needs, there is no problem. Now what happens is that in today's environment, you have two choices as an employer when you find out that you cannot fill your jobs -- you either lower your requirements and increase your training, and perhaps reduce the quality of your service, or you say, 'well, gee, what we ought to do is to raise the value of that job and pay more."*

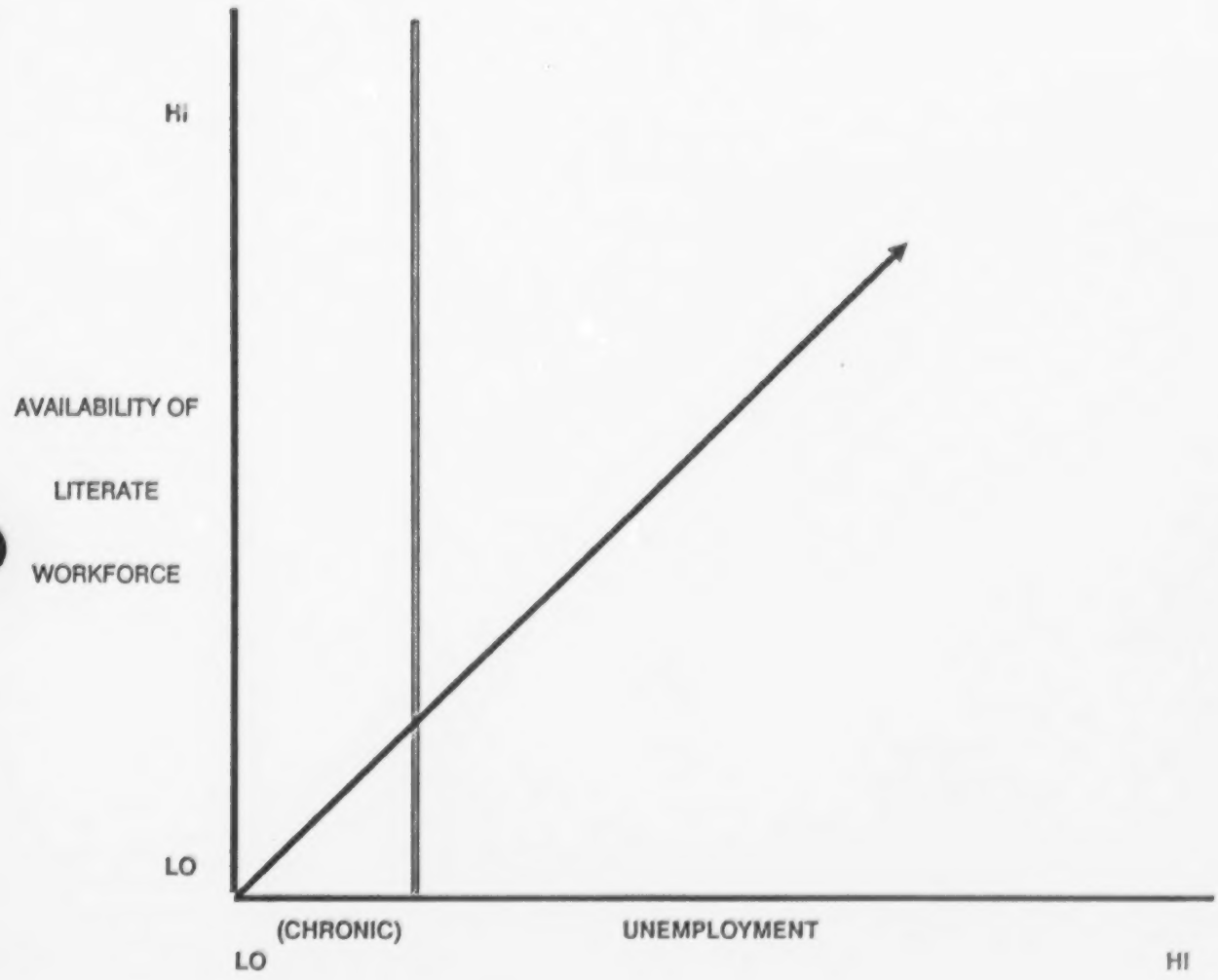
Unless an executive is knowledgeable about the scope and impact of the literacy issue, he does not necessarily make the connection that the root cause of many different problems related to employment, productivity, increased costs, turnover and even injury are, in fact, a function of an inadequate level of literacy. Several executives, in fact, consider that the severity of the literacy problem within the work force is simply a correlate of the unemployment statistic. During times of high unemployment, applicants are plentiful; workers who will accept less are readily available because they need the jobs. The implication of this perception is that the awareness and attention to the issue of literacy in the work force may diminish as the unemployment statistic increases -- literacy will simply not appear to be a problem.

> *"So far as the major employers that we're talking about here in Philadelphia, what we're really concerned about in our society, is being able to get qualified employees."*

"This is not Houston where you have 25% unemployment rate overall. We have a 4.1% unemployment rate overall in Philadelphia, and it is less than 2% in the surrounding Pennsylvania counties. We are basically at full employment, yet, there is a large pocket of individuals, mostly black and hispanic, who cannot take advantage of that kind of demand."

The graph on the following page illustrates these dynamics.

PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP OF LITERATE WORKFORCE AVAILABILITY TO UNEMPLOYMENT



- PAY MORE
- LOWER STANDARDS
- SERVICE PROBLEMS
- TURNOVER

- PAY LESS
- RAISE STANDARDS

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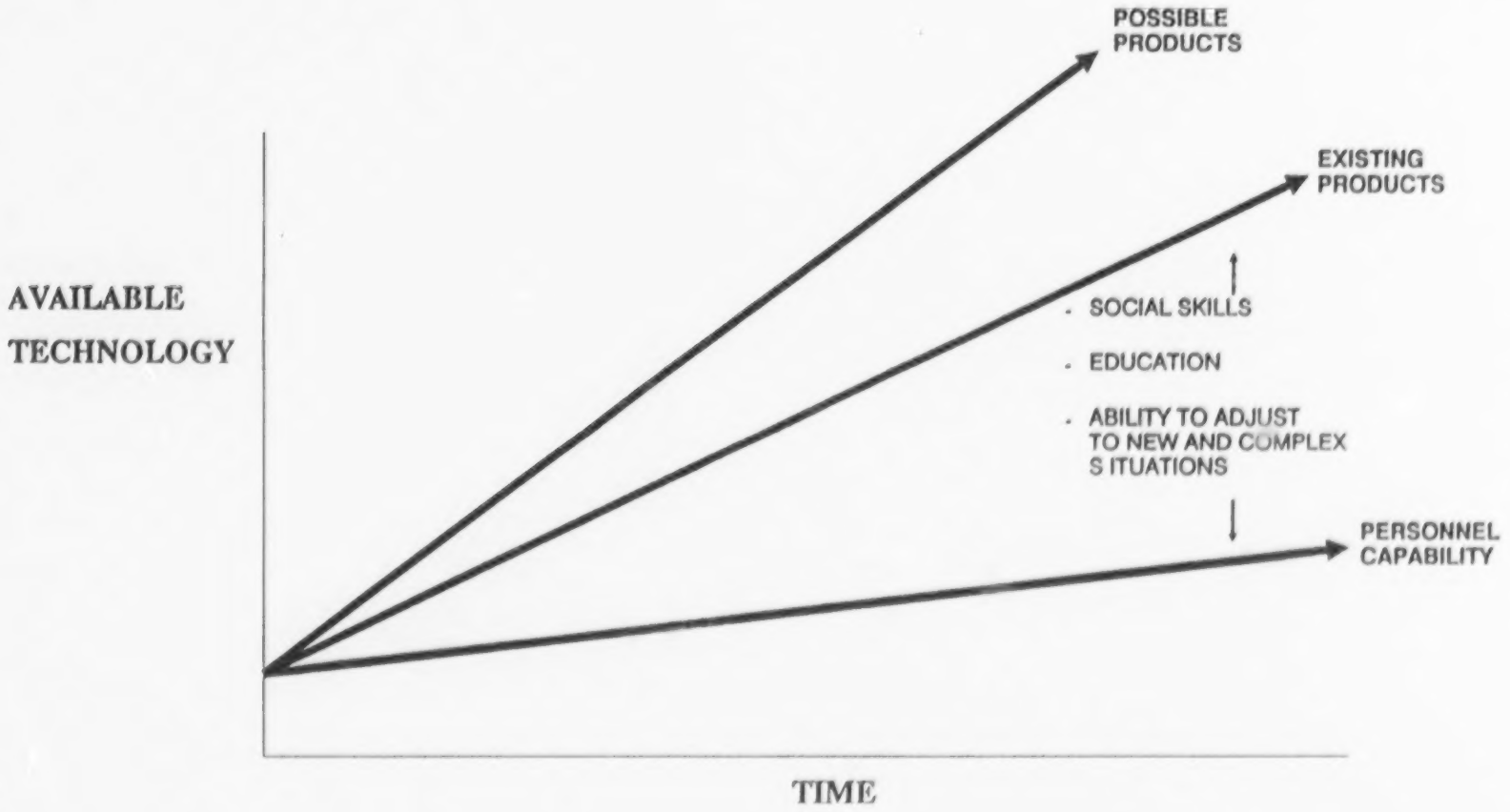
Some executives consider that literacy issues have a substantial impact on marketing and customer services. Systems technology demands entry level employees who are capable of responding rapidly to customer requests and order processing, have adequate social and language skills and are able to adjust to new and complex situations rapidly. In telecommunications, banking, retailing and other fields, executives are becoming increasingly concerned about their ability to support their products and services. A few of these executives do not consider the issue to be competitive, in that *"we are all in the same boat"*. One executive acknowledges in frustration that the design of new products is limited not by technology, but by the ability of the organization to provide competent service personnel to work with the technology.

> *"It is not only that professional services are the highest growing area of the economy, it is also that the requirements of entry level work are changing and are pushing all of us in a direction where verbal skills, written skills, math skills are really important in those entry level positions."*

> *"If we went totally computerized next month and we required people to be totally literate as well as having the self-starting mechanism to make changes in the operation, I don't know how many people we would be able to utilize."*

This relationship between available technology and the ability of the work force to respond to the technology is represented on the following graph.

THE WORK SKILLS LITERACY GAP



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RESPONSIBILITY FOR LITERACY

Overwhelmingly, in the opinion of these executives, the schools and the government have let society down in their mission to produce a literate graduating body. While the family and the individual share the responsibility, they inherit the conditions imposed upon them by their environment, their social class, and ultimately, the government's control of the school system.

> *"I think getting back to the basics, more emphasis on, if you want to call it the three R's, as opposed to basket weaving, athletics and things like that, prepares people better and earlier for computers, PC's, mathematics. I think the basic sciences, mathematics, languages -- will get people to better understand and to question things, as opposed to just accepting them at face value. It gets them to use their minds."*

> *"We have to change the law. We have to make sure that government recognizes it has responsibilities."*

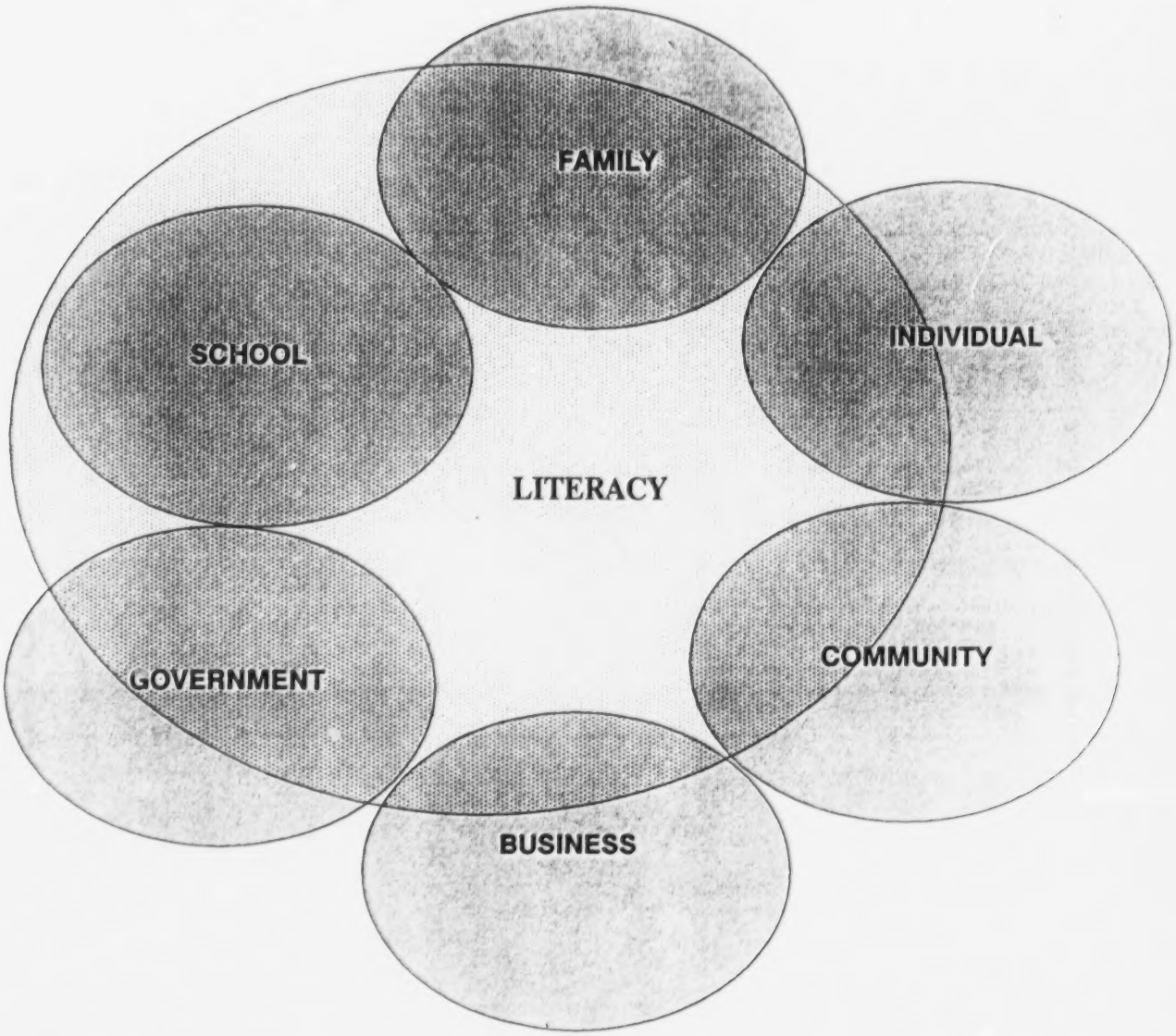
Those interviewed are compassionate for the plight of the illiterate, but do not consider that business is either directly or indirectly responsible for the existing state of illiteracy. Many of them expressed a strong desire for leadership in city government to address this issue, and view literacy as one of a cluster of serious problems including drugs, crime, divorce and abandonment, and health issues. Drugs are frequently mentioned as the most serious threat to the community in terms of its devastating effect on individuals, families and entire communities.

> *"There are so many societal problems and resources are so limited with which to deal with them, the tendency is to pick and choose."*

> *"You can see the results of drugs but illiteracy is invisible and you don't run into it or you run into the effects of it, but you don't realize the causes. You know that this person robbed you, and why did they? They robbed you because they have no other livelihood."*

The diagram that follows illustrates the executives' view of who is responsible for the problem.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR A LITERATE POPULATION



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CONTEXT FOR A COMMITMENT TO LITERACY PROGRAMS

An analysis of the interviews in the aggregate indicates that a relationship exists between the executives' commitment to literacy programs and the context in which they view the worker. The context in which the worker is viewed, in fact, organizes the executive's thinking which, in turn, generates workplace literacy program decisions.

Using this framework, the executives can be roughly classified as fitting into one of three groups, defined in terms of the executive's primary focus:

1. ***"Get the job done."*** These executives are interested in maintaining the status quo. In this group, which had the least representation among the executives interviewed, the emphasis is on maintaining productivity and a concern for the present.

2. ***"Work skills literacy."*** This group supports developing skills and promoting the worker. In this group, which had the greatest representation among the executives interviewed, the emphasis is on developing the skills of the worker based upon the workers' value in supporting the future of the organization.

Executives who consider the literacy issue to be the responsibility of the community rather than the organization, value training programs, but do not consider that their organization's responsibility extends beyond working hours. These organizations tend to institute more rigorous screening criteria to keep the illiterate out by downgrading jobs, tolerating high turnover, coping with service problems and in drastic situations, relocating.

> *"When this whole issue of labor force skills became very evident, the insurance companies took the view that if we can't get smarter people, we'll get smarter technology and we'll transfer the work to technology and, in effect, we can afford to hire less able, or to put it bluntly, stupider people."*

"So the employer often focuses a lot of attention on selection. Let me make sure that I can bring into my company sufficient numbers of skilled people to do the job, so that day one, by virtue of my selection process, I have a productive, effective group of people."

Other executives consider that their responsibility is to provide workers with all the skills needed to perform their present jobs capably, and the opportunity of advancement. Therefore, the focus is on skills training directly related to the worker's job -- both present and future -- within the organization. Literacy training programs may or may not be part of the standard training, determined by whether literacy is perceived to be a skill needed to perform on the job.

"We want them to think, to participate, to understand, and the more literate they become the greater the understanding, as far as this operation or even their own particular job. They could grow beyond their highest level and become part of management if they wanted to."

"To me, workplace literacy in a more refined way refers to an employer diagnosing a specific lack of basic competencies."

3. ***"Work skills literacy and personal literacy."*** This group believes that their role is to develop skills, promote the worker and enhance the quality of the person's life. This group, which had limited representation among the executives interviewed, emphasized developing the worker for the future of the organization and providing support in terms of their overall quality of life.

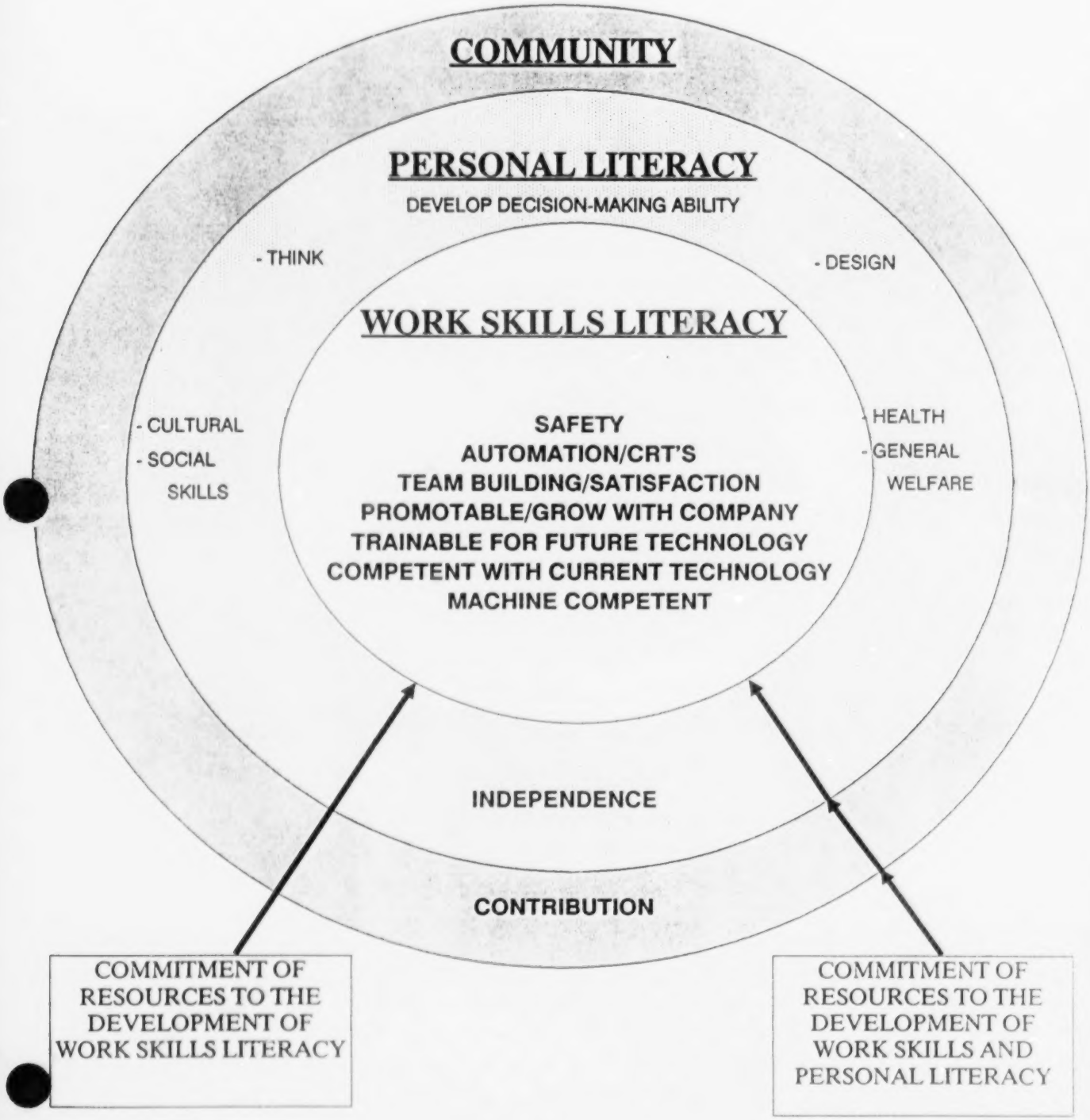
The executive with a focus on *"work skills literacy and personal literacy"* is typified by one of the respondents in particular, who considers literacy programs to be the cornerstone of the organization's training efforts. He indicated that he values the worker beyond the boundaries of the organization and actively supports literacy programs both within the organization and the community.

"I think that when a company looks at its employees as more than cogs in a machine, they see whole human beings whose entire lives affect their work performance, their family life, the stability of the work force and the institutional climate in which they function."

"I would say the operative phrase is the person who can't read well enough, not, the person who can't read. You will then ask, 'well, enough to do what?' I would answer that with, 'well enough to survive, to cope, to get employed and to have a reasonable quality of life.'"

The distinctions that exist among these executives are portrayed on the following chart where the commitment to literacy is identified in terms of the use of company resources.

THE CONTEXT FOR COMMITMENT TO LITERACY



EXECUTIVES' ASSESSMENT OF WORKERS' BARRIERS IN SIGNING UP FOR LITERACY TRAINING

During the interview, each respondent was asked to comment upon their perception of the worker's barriers, if any, in coming forward and admitting to having a literacy problem. The issues which executives think exist among workers are:

- o A concern for their reputation - the worker would be stigmatized by the organization because of his admission of a literacy problem and his progress within the company would suffer, both in terms of promotions and salary increases, or he could be stigmatized by his peer group.

- o Fear of failure - the worker who comes forward with a literacy problem and is unable to successfully complete the program would be publicly known to have failed, and other job capabilities and his future potential would be questioned. Ultimately, the worker would fear that this might result in the loss of his job.

- o Mistrust - the worker would actually consider the program to be a ploy to expose those who, because of illiteracy, were a detriment to the organization, and should be weeded out.

> *"I think initially it's a lot of people saying, 'I'll sign up, I'll sign up.' Then, you know, peer pressure, or, 'I don't want that person to know that I'm going there because that makes me feel bad, or they might think that I'm stupid.'"*

> *"In their minds, they are not afraid of failure and since management has now made this (G.E.D.) a requirement, they believe that they raise the requirement to get rid of them."*

> *"Once you get into a company, I think the admission has a lot to do with what happens to you if you admit it. I mean, there are some bossesthat if a person admits that they can't do something are quite punitive."*

Overall, the executives commented that they do not think that the worker can see a clear and certain payoff for acknowledging a literacy problem.

EXECUTIVES' BARRIERS TO COMMITTING COMPANY RESOURCES TO LITERACY TRAINING PROGRAMS

Those executives who were reluctant to commit resources to literacy programs or to have literacy program support be highly visible have various rationales for their points of view and their behavior:

- The issue of literacy is considered to be someone else's responsibility and an inappropriate use of the company's resources.

- Literacy skills are deemed as unnecessary for job performance (manual tasks, maid service, janitorial services, etc.).

- The investment in procedures would be very costly both in terms of implementing the programs and in terms of the inevitable changes that would result from the programs; it is assumed that changes would include signage, existing training programs, procedures, safety regulations, equipment and other factors.

- The admission of having a serious literacy problem could negatively impact the image and reputation of the organization, both internally and externally.

> *"I think society in general is letting them down. I think we have moved on. The competitive atmosphere has to stay competitive in this high tech environment. What has happened here is that we have been so focused in getting our business back to being competitive that we have mechanized at a faster rate."*

"This bank, probably the banking industry, as far as I understand it, does not have a serious literacy problem. It is undoubtedly true that there are particular jobs where we don't pay attention to the literacy of the prospective employee, such as a cleaner, whose work record is a good deal more important to us than his or her ability to read and write."

"I would say that the concept of literacy has to be brought to the business world. One of the problems is that the business community tends to look at literacy in a very narrow frame, that it is entirely seen as jobs that are skill-related and I'm not sure if that's enough."

SUMMARY

The problem of literacy within the workplace is far-reaching and complex. It includes the overall perception of literacy as an issue of concern within the organization, the philosophy of how the business operates, strategies regarding hiring and retaining employees, and the overall commitment of the organization to work skills literacy. These factors are an integral part of an organization's response to literacy problems in terms of allocating resources to programs.

The sponsorship of work skills literacy programs in organizations is directly related to the perceived benefits of literacy efforts, both to the organization and the worker, and the short and long term value the executives place on the benefits.

The methods and practices put into place to address the problem of literacy confronting an organization are directly related to the context in which the worker is held by the executives in charge. When the worker is held as a resource to *"get the job done"* and little more, literacy program support is almost non-existent. However, work skills training (not necessarily related to literacy) is readily available for specific jobs. When the worker is held as a resource for the job at hand as well as for future positions, work skills training and in many cases, literacy program support is considered to be integral to the overall design of training programs. When the worker is held not only as a vital resource to the future of the company, but also to the community, a comprehensive ongoing commitment to literacy programs is made.

RECOMMENDATIONS

EXECUTIVES' RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING LITERACY EFFORTS

The executives were asked for their recommendations regarding the issue of literacy. The following suggestions are taken directly from their comments:

- **Position literacy as everybody's problem.**

  "This is the role that these major corporations can play in supporting the literacy movement as a whole. It could contribute employees' time. It could encourage employees to go on the boards of these organizations. It could encourage their employees to become tutors and volunteers. It could help the movement advocate in governmental circles and with the media, while providing proper support and attention in the public sector."

- **Dramatize the story of workplace education within the schools, underscoring the importance of workplace literacy skills to students while they are still in school.**

  "I think the task force, over time, could serve in an important ambassadorial role to identify those kids and get that message out in the schools. Essentially what you want to do is say to young kids, 'there is a payoff for doing well, for taking the time in terms of your education and preparing yourself for work. That payoff is this kind of experience, or we'll pay attention to you as an employer.'"

- **Educate businesses in the ways in which they can contribute and become involved.**

  "Companies don't always know exactly what they can do. There should be some kind of educational program to let them know how they can make a difference."

- **Highlight the advantages that accrue to a company that invests in literacy.**

  "I think that's also a very enriching activity for employees of a company -- to perfect its own image as that of an institution that cares about other people. It's good for its relationship with its own employees and it's good for its image in the community. Let people know about that."

- **Provide exposure to employers of the successful implementation of workplace literacy programs and offer training programs to duplicate these successes.**

  "I think what has to happen in the future is what has happened successfully in the past couple of years. Show what has been going on and copy what has worked. That is effective promotion."

  "The successful experimenters, the successful implementors, need to be given visibility, in the electronic as well as print media so that there is a sense of progress being made."

- **Provide additional funding for the school system to expand pre-school programs.**

  "One problem is the issue of funding. If funding were not an issue, my guess is that there is a lot the school system could do. It could expand its pre-school programs."

- **Administer standardized achievement tests to all school systems -- public, private and parochial.**

  "The schools are failing. People are graduating without knowing the basics. The only way to stop this is to start giving standardized tests. Then at least we could see how bad the problem really is."

QUANTIFICATION OF FINDINGS

It is recommended that a follow-up quantitative study be conducted to provide clarity and direction regarding the perceived benefits of executives committing an organization's resources toward literacy efforts. Designing a marketing strategy to effectively position the issue of literacy among executives is central to the long term growth of American businesses.

It is also recommended that the vision declared by the head of The Mayor's Task Force on Literacy in Philadelphia, Jack Ernsberger, Vice President, IBM -- **A LITERATE AMERICA BY 2001** -- be declared a national priority.